

March 27, 2023

Dakota County Board of Commissioners
c/o Matt Smith, County Manager
1590 Highway 55
Hastings, MN 55033

RE: Opioid Funding

Commissioners,

I write this letter to share the perspective of West St. Paul as it relates to use of opioid settlement funding. We have a general idea of some of the planning that has been going on, however we wanted to raise some concerns and potential solutions as you are deliberating how this funding is to be allocated.

As an overarching theme, the City of West St. Paul believes in collaboration and broadly agrees that a county-wide approach has a great deal of merit. However, there are some concerns we have specifically related to both how these funds are allocated and the needs of each city throughout the county to prevent and cure opioid abuse.

Request – Consider Equitable Distribution of Settlement Funding

The agreement that the State negotiated gives a direct allocation of settlement funding to cities with a population over 30,000. While this would seem to be a reasonable cutoff point, it does not take into account the impacts of the opioid epidemic to communities and city organizations.

Due to our population WSP did not receive direct allocation. In theory, the portion of the settlement funding that is directed toward the WSP community has been allocated to the County. Our argument is that simply because we are below 30,000 in population, WSP and our specific needs may be overlooked. As you can see from the attachment to this letter, WSP and South St. Paul combined have the highest per capita instance of overdose calls (overdose data is combined with SSP due to our shared fire/EMS services). Anecdotally, we believe a majority of overdose calls between the two cities come from WSP – meaning WSP's per capita instance is even higher than shown.

We do not believe that the allocation methodology recognizes the need for assistance to combat the opioid epidemic. We do not know the intentions of the cities that did receive a direct allocation, and we do not fault them for their policy decisions. But if each of those cities retain their allocation for local programs and priorities, inequity will result. This is because those cities will receive the benefit of any County programming in addition to the benefits of their local programs that will be funded with their direct allocation. This inequity will be especially compounded due to the greater level of need in WSP, as you can see in the attachment.

We ask the County Board to consider the policy decisions of other cities, the direct need in WSP and consider possibilities to make allocations more equitable.

Request – Consider Community Differences

In WSP, we are aware that there are at least three differentiating contributing factors to the higher overdose statistics in our community. Those three factors are unhoused population, number of group and residential treatment facilities and proximity to the urban hub. These three factors, in whole or in part, differentiate us from other communities in the County. Therefore, specific approaches aimed at treating the cause of overdose, based on those three factors would have the greatest impact on reduction of opioid abuse and overdose.

WSP has a history of designing effective, innovative approaches to solving community problems, including those related to mental health and substance abuse disorder. We believe that our city council, administration and police department have the best grasp on the problems in our community and are well positioned to address them using targeted strategies based on our intimate knowledge of our community. There is definitely a need for a county-wide approach and support structures to be delivered through public health and human services, however there is also a need for smaller strategies that can best be implemented through those who are closest to our community.

We ask the County Board to consider possibilities to facilitate the design and implementation of targeted strategies to combat opioid abuse and overdose at the community level.

Potential Solutions

In addition to continuing the collaborative approach Dakota County has already begun to employ in developing programs and services to end opioid abuse and overdose, we ask for consideration of the following solutions to our requests noted above.

Provide direct allocation to Dakota County cities under 30,000 Population.

The County Board would establish a formula to provide direct allocation to each of the cities that did not receive a direct allocation. This approach would be permitted under the settlement agreement Section IV. The County Board could set reasonable conditions on reporting, collaborative development of programs and services and metrics of success.

Set aside funding for cities under 30,000 to apply for grants for targeted strategies.

The County Board would set aside a portion of the settlement funds for cities that did not receive a direct allocation to work collaboratively with county departments to develop and implement targeted strategies specific to their communities. This approach would be permitted under the settlement agreement Section IV. The County Board could set reasonable conditions. This approach would allow for the smaller cities to develop innovative ideas that if proven successful could be expanded further, at a much smaller risk than a county-wide strategy.

Ensure balance between the Cities

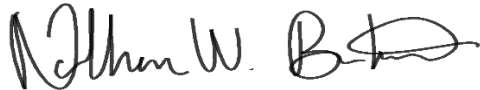
Since WSP and other cities under the 30,000 population threshold have no independent control over the distribution and use of opioid settlement funding, we ask that the County Board consider how the cities over 30,000 are planning to use their allocation. If all or most of those cities are

planning on using all or a portion of their allocation toward locally driven strategies and policies, it is only fair that cities under the population cutoff are recognized. This could come in the form of direct allocation, county waiver of payment for certain services and membership dues, grants, dedicating staff resources or any combination of assistance that the County Board deems appropriate.

Conclusion

It cannot be overstated that WSP appreciates our partnership with the County and other cities within the County. This letter is an attempt to make sure that our community, the needs that we have and the ideas that we have to combat the opioid epidemic are not overlooked. Through it all, we know that whatever we do in this policy area we need the assistance, support and partnership of county departments and our city neighbors – we are simply looking for a fair opportunity to support our community in the way that cities with a population over 30,000 can.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nathan W. Burkett". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "N" and a stylized "B" at the end.

Nathan Burkett, City Manager
City of West St. Paul

Cc: Brian Sturgeon, Chief of Police
West St. Paul City Council